The Internet as Spectator Disclosure: Consent, Community, and Responsibility in Patricia Lockwood's Viral Poem "Rape Joke"

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In "Rape as Spectator Sport and Creepshot Entertainment: Social Media and the Valorization of Lack of Consent," the American philosopher Kelly Oliver provides a compelling and chilling analysis of the use and impact of social media by perpetrators of or bystanders to sexual assault. Patricia Lockwood's 2013 long-form narrative poem, "Rape Joke," which was published online and went viral on social media, offers a complement to Oliver's analysis by presenting an Internet account of sexual assault from the survivor's perspective. "Rape Joke," through its content and form, raises questions to which we must philosophically and socially respond. These include both the importance of first-person narratives for social and philosophical engagements with trauma as well as the use of humor to constitute moral community and shape moral accountability.

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Introduction

1 Patricia Lockwood's poem "Rape Joke" is an instance of epistemic resistance to trauma and an ethical demand to attend to trauma narratives. The poem was published in 2013 by the *Awl*, an online magazine which self-describes as a "weblog" seeking "an audience of intelligent readers." Editors of the *Awl* believe that there is "no topic unworthy of scrutiny, so long that it is approached from an intelligent angle" and that "there are many topics worthy of scrutiny that lack coverage because of commercial factors" (The Awl Editors). This mission accurately describes Lockwood's long-form narrative poem built around the phenomenon of the rape joke. The poem went viral on social media and was covered in mainstream media including the *Guardian*, the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* (Groskop; Plunkett; and Lichtenstein). The *Awl* took a topic that had lacked coverage—a poetic account of rape from a survivor's perspective—and catapulted it to a broad audience through Internet publication.

2 The poem's title, content, and method of dissemination raise issues about consent, humor, trauma, and the Internet. "Rape Joke" posits itself as a joke that responds to the social silencing of rape. While this could be read as a troubling suggestion, e.g. that a joke is the only way to approach a public conversation about rape, it also reveals the subversive power of humor to identify social problems and call for accountability. Kelly Oliver recently provided a compelling—and chilling—analysis of the use and impact of social media by perpetrators of or bystanders to sexual assault. Lockwood's poem provides a nuanced complement to Oliver's analysis by taking up social media from the sexual assault survivor perspective, thereby offering a counter-narrative to the potential harms of social media vis-à-vis sexual consent and assault. Instead of constituting and reinforcing a culture that valorizes lack of sexual consent or generating a vicious cycle of trauma and re-traumatization for a victim of assault via social media (Oliver), "Rape Joke" presents the possibility for the Internet to be a site of epistemic resistance, using "our epistemic resources and abilities to undermine and change oppressive normative structures and the complacent cognitive-affective functioning that sustains those structures" (Medina 3).

3 My argument will unfold in three moves. First, through a close reading of "Rape Joke" I will trace two connected elements: the poem's deployment of liminal images and concepts and, relatedly, its

engagement with humor, which occupies a liminal position in the poem. Second, I will analyze the poem as a first-person trauma narrative and argue that “Rape Joke” is responding to an imperative raised by Susan Brison to generate (and listen to) first-person accounts of trauma. Third, I will connect the close reading to an analysis of the liminal space of the poem *qua* poem-on-the-Internet. Here I will argue that the fact of the poem as Internet and social media phenomenon is yet another instance of the poem’s liminal role, in which its audience is at once anyone and no one in particular. I will conclude by suggesting that the poem encourages epistemic resistance while using liminality and humor to form moral communities held ethically accountable to receive and respond to trauma narratives.

Close-Reading

The Liminal

4 “Rape Joke” is replete with liminal imagery and comprised of ambiguities. Shifting meanings cannot be fixedly defined—which is part of what poetry can do: trouble rigid interpretation and definitions. The instances of ambiguity are not limited to the language or literary devices of the poem but extend to the scenes described between consensual and coerced sex, responsibility, and speaking about rape.

5 The poem opens: “The rape joke is that you were 19 years old/The rape joke is that he was your boyfriend” (Lockwood). A story unfolds about the speaker’s relationship with a “boyfriend” seven years older and the events surrounding their non-consensual sexual encounter. The facts that the speaker is not a minor and that her assailant was familiar to her indicate that the poem tells a story likely familiar to the reader, if not personally, then statistically: Nearly 50% of all rapes in the United States are committed by a friend or acquaintance, and 80% are committed by someone familiar to the victim, who is most often under the age of 30 (Rape, Abuse & and Incest National Network). A precarious boundary thus exits between the speaker, who is legally an adult yet still a teenager barely on the threshold between youth and adulthood, and her “boyfriend,” who is in his late twenties. The speaker “had known him for years,” but was “too young to be interested in him” and “then suddenly [was] older, but not very old at all” (Lockwood). The speaker’s attacker being her “boyfriend” creates a porosity of intimacy mirrored by the porous familiarity that this kind of story of intimate abuse is one statistically and culturally prevalent. It is a story that plays on the cultural trope of the “rape joke”—assuming our familiarity with this motif while destabilizing it at the same time.

6 Recounting events that occurred ten years prior, age is just one way in which the poem works with a liminal sense of time and place. Lockwood moves between the speaker’s present views of the past, her beliefs at the time of her assault, and her mental and emotional state in the years intervening. The speaker addresses herself saying “you were crazy for the next five years, and had to move cities, and had to move states,” and then “for the next five years all you did was write, and never about yourself” (Lockwood). The speaker moves between cities and states, just as the poem moves between past and present, never remaining fixed in place.

7 The most overt liminal image in the poem is that the boyfriend/rapist was “a bouncer, and kept people out for a living” (Lockwood); his job was to oversee a threshold between who remains on the outside and who gets let in. Yet there are many more subtle engagements with the liminal in the language of the poem itself. At one point, the speaker describes how the boyfriend/rapist “carried a knife, and would show it to you, and would turn it over and over in his hands as if it were a book.” To make matters worse, he also had “a row of paperbacks about serial killers” (Lockwood). In Lockwood’s language—where weapons are treated like books and books are about murders—knowledge and violence are closely woven together. There is a constant tension between life and death as well as safety and violence in the poem’s allusions to “dead poets,” the absence of “warm bodies,” and a dream of killing.

8 The violence looming in the poem is one for which responsibility is distributed among a cast of characters. While the “boyfriend” is clearly the perpetrator of the assault, the speaker ascribes some responsibility to her past self, to her father, as well as to the readers through their very encounter with the

poem. In the first three lines of the poem, the meaning of “the rape joke” changes three times—in the third instance becoming the rapist himself: “the rape joke it wore a goatee” (Lockwood). The rapist *is* the rape joke insofar as he is identified as the problem itself, as *the* responsible agent for the sexual assault. This move is also a form of epistemic resistance: The speaker resists the power of her rapist by turning him into a joke.

9 Yet the speaker does not clearly demarcate responsibility. She asks “how can a piece of knowledge be stupid?” adding “but of course you were so stupid.” She recognizes her own failure to see that her “boyfriend” was becoming her assailant. When she tells her father of her assault, “he made the sign of the cross over [her] and said ‘I absolve you of your sins’,” displacing his daughter’s victimization as her own sin, not her attacker’s. The speaker acknowledges that “even in its total wrongheadedness,” her father’s act was “so completely sweet.” She sees her father’s failure but also reads into it an element of care. And when the speaker asks her rapist “why he did it […] he said he didn’t know,” responding instead, “YOU were the one who was drunk” (Lockwood). Since the rapist cannot account for his actions, he displaces blame on his victim.

10 Finally, when the speaker recounts how she “should have seen it coming,” the reader becomes implicated as well. We see it coming too, for as the speaker says “this rape joke is practically writing itself” (Lockwood). The ambiguous nature of responsibility in “Rape Joke” is not to move or remove responsibility away from the rapist who committed an act of sexual assault. Rather, it reveals the liminal nature of consent, which may only be fully recognized or articulated as absent in retrospect. The poem’s speaker in “Rape Joke” has an epistemic position ten years later that she did not have at the time of her assault. Both her father and her rapist failed to see their own roles. In drawing out ambiguities—particularly of responsibility—the poem draws its readers into a larger community of moral responsibility for having perpetuated a culture that valorizes lack of consent (Oliver) and the social silencing of rape. In the next section, I will explore how the aspect of humor and the trope of the “rape joke” are crucial to this move toward moral community formation and accountability.

“Can Any Part of the Rape Joke Be Funny?” (Lockwood)

11 “Rape Joke” runs several pages long with many lines starting out or including the phrase “the rape joke is.” The words “rape joke” are repeated more than thirty times, confronting the reader with the term in alternately sad, uncomfortable, self-aware, and ironic ways. The poem self-consciously deploys “rape joke,” at times suggesting that “it gets funnier,” but then asking “Can rape jokes be funny at all, is the question/Can any part of the rape joke be funny” (Lockwood). What exactly a rape joke *is* twists and turns before the readers’ eyes. When we think that we know *what* the rape joke is—the poem’s title—it then becomes its content, its motif, and by the third line, the rape joke has already become the rapist himself. Thus, the rape joke constitutes another liminal element of the poem. What is announced to be a “joke” is in fact a testimony to rape. Yet the poem also contains moments of sharp humor: The final stanza, in which the speaker recounts how her rapist gave her a Beach Boys album, is “a little bit funny” and we have to “admit it” (Lockwood).

12 Arguably, the rape joke phenomenon reveals a “glorifying of rape” (Brison 7) or a culture that valorizes (by joking about) lack of consent (Oliver). But Lockwood’s poem reveals the problem of a culture that glorifies rape and lack of consent by engaging directly with the trope of the rape joke. Writing in the *Guardian*, Viv Groskop states that Lockwood “may well be the first person with an actual sense of humour to write an attack on rape jokes,” but then quickly asks, “or is it actually a defence of rape jokes? Ah, you see that’s why it’s so clever.” Apparently, this is part of the poem’s liminality. One can “read this poem initially as an attack on rape jokes,” and then suggest, “it’s actually not about rape jokes at all. It’s about what it’s like to be raped. Which is not funny.” Yet, “by the time you read to the end, you realize that [Lockwood’s] argument is subtle” (Groskop). Humor is deployed in such a way that rape jokes *qua* rape jokes are not funny. But it is possible to use the phenomenon of the rape joke to comment on the phenomenon itself—and at the same time to be genuinely funny. Moving “between outrageousness and outrage” is part of Lockwood’s “genius for writing in the language of vulgar misogyny as she speaks of its

absurdity" (Plunkett).

13 Groskop suggests that "Rape Joke" is "great tragi-comedy" in which "you can't get to the humour until you go through the pain first." This is, however, not the reading I want to endorse. The genre of tragicomedy conveys coexistence of humor and tragedy but also the idea of a happy ending. Also, it may signal a sense of deprecation or absurdity of the work ("Tragicomedy"). It is not required, nor even clear, that "Rape Joke" has a happy ending, except insofar as the speaker has been able to write about her assault. The (possible) personal and social benefits of this ending I will explore below.

14 This reading suggests that the assault and its pain were necessary conditions for the humor of Lockwood's poem and that this humor is the point—or achievement—of the poem. But we should be careful in how far we affirm the humor in "Rape Joke." The view of pain as a necessary part of the path to humor, for instance, misreads humor as the goal of the poem instead of merely a tool to make its point. Depicting humor as the poem's achievement yields a type of Nietzschean affirmation, which says that to endorse what is funny we must also endorse the pain that led to the humor (see Wallace 5 and chapters 3.2 and 4.3 in particular for a recent reading of this feature in Nietzsche). However, the humor of Lockwood's poem is not part of a redemptive path out of pain, but rather a challenge to "question the jokes' appeal to her audience and to herself" (Plunkett).

Ethics of Humor

15 We might say that Lockwood, as a poet, "wants to be able to take what happened seriously and face the horror of it" but that "she also recognizes the power of horror" (Groskop)—as well as the power of humor. Humor theorists have written about the intersection of horror with humor (and aesthetics more broadly, see Carroll "Horrors and Humor"; Gaut; Levinson). Posed within the text and implied by our engagement with the poem, "Rape Joke" directly confronts its reader with the question of whether a rape joke can be funny. "Rape Joke" was published online, and went viral on social media: What, then, does it mean to click on, share, or "like" on Facebook a link that is called "Rape Joke"? Is the reader anticipating being amused, horrified, outraged?

16 Berys Gaut writes about the moralist and anti-moralist "radically opposed views about when it is morally permissible to find something funny." The moralist "believes our sense of humor is fully answerable to ethical considerations." We must hold jokes (and ourselves), especially racist or sexist jokes that play on "bad stereotypes or express a derogatory attitude," accountable by *not finding them funny*. The anti-moralist, on the other hand, understands humor as "essentially anarchic" and "unburdened by the restraints and repressions of everyday interactions," making humor of "great value for our lives" (51). Both polarities suggest normative qualities of humor: that it either ought to conform to and uphold ethical norms or that it is a temporary escape hatch from such norms.

17 Degrees of moralism and anti-moralism exist. A less strong claim than moralism is the ethicist thesis which states "that if an utterer manifests ethically bad attitudes in the production of the joke […] then that *counts against* the humor of the joke" (Gaut 55). While I cannot stage a full argument against his conclusion in the space of this paper, I would nevertheless contend that "Rape Joke" supports the validity of an immoralist position along the anti-moralist spectrum as Gaut presents it. "*Immoralism*" holds that the "ethically bad attitudes" comprising a joke's content "count toward the funniness of the joke" and that "a joke can be funny partly because it is so cruel" (Gaut 55). The account of immoralism is more complex than this brief characterization and it is one that Gaut takes seriously, though ultimately dismissing it in favor of ethicism. However, reading "Rape Joke" with an immoralist approach yields what I take to be the correct reading of Lockwood's poem. This suggests a place for immoralism in humor to do important ethical work.

18 "Rape Joke" juxtaposes humor with a horrific event in such a way that "does not 'fit' with our normal ethical responses and expectations" (Gaut 59). In line with the immoralist, the poem shows that "the unethical can be a vehicle of humor" (59). We may deem "Rape Joke" to be an aggressive or vicious engagement of a joke-type: the rape joke; however, "the immoralist correctly notes that jokes can be

funny because they are aggressive or abuse people" (Gaut 64). In the case of Lockwood's poem, any perceived aggression or immorality of the "rape joke" in fact serves an important ethical dimension. The viciousness is a form of counter-power and social critique. The poem interrupts "normal ethical responses and expectations," eliciting a productive discomfiture in the reader who is asked to interrogate why and how the rape joke type has come to be a form of humor "used as an instrument of oppression" (51) in the first place.

19 This call for reflection is only achieved if we understand the "joke" in immoralist terms. Along moralist, including ethicist, views we cannot make sense of the subversive nature of Lockwood's "Rape Joke." Although "ethicism also allows for the possibility of the joke retaining some humor, despite viciousness," it nonetheless requires that the "ethically bad attitudes" of a joke's content are held against it (Gaut 64). This would require us to hold the *use* of the ethically bad attitude of the "rape joke" phenomenon *against* Lockwood's poem. One might suggest that Lockwood is *mentioning* rape jokes rather than *using* them. However we see this use/mention distinction, even the view that she is not *making* a rape joke but making a *comment* on rape jokes, does not fully embrace her point. She is not merely talking about rape jokes in the way I am in this paper, discussing their existence; instead, she is purposefully deploying the very phenomenon itself, *using* and re-naming what is an ethically bad attitude to transform its power. If we deny the poem's humor, or the nature of this humor, we are not only not getting the joke—we are not getting its ethics, either.

20 Getting the joke is essential to humor. Jokes function according to norms and conventions; ethically bad jokes reveal particular normative concerns. Ted Cohen claims that jokes are conditional and that an audience must agree on certain conditions for a joke to resonate as funny (12). In other words "a joke plays upon the sedimented knowledge and feeling of the listeners" (Carroll, "Intimate Laughter" 438). Not only do jokes, if successful, rely upon the presupposed "shared knowledge and belief between teller and audience" (437), but they also reveal shared knowledge and beliefs. Jokes are not only dependent on cultural norms and practices, they reflect these norms whenever we 'get' a joke. Jokes, in turn, constitute community by drawing their audience into participation in a group that makes, understands, or is capable of responding to a type of joke. "Rape Joke" is peppered with particular cultural references shared by its readers, e.g. to "The Rock," soap operas, wine coolers, and the Beach Boy's album *Pet Sounds* (Lockwood). Lockwood draws her reader in as part of a shared culture, and because we participate in that culture, we get her jokes. And because we get her jokes, we participate in the culture. Which makes Lockwood's use of the rape joke—and the fact we get it—at once clever and disconcerting.

Trauma Narratives

21 The reader participates in a culture that gets a joke about rape because we live in a culture that sustains rape. Oliver writes about American culture turning sexual assault into a "spectator sport" on social media in which perpetrators of sexual assault document their non-consensual encounters through photographs or videos that get posted to social media sites (Oliver). The documentation of sexual assault on the Internet has two striking by-products. One is that rapes are now "recorded rather than reported" (Oliver). If women's verbal testimony to their rape has traditionally been challenged or viewed as unreliable, we now have—without some women even knowing that they were raped—evidence of their assault. The other by-product is that sexual assault survivors are faced with the additional trauma of their assault being made (extremely) public. When shared on social media, victimization and trauma go viral (Oliver).

22 Oliver's argument recognizes a culture that produces and promotes sex without consent and the cycle of trauma that social media perpetuates for victims of assaults documented online. Lockwood's poem is another type of viral account of rape. However, it is told from the perspective of a rape survivor using the Internet (and poetry) to address her experience. Lockwood's poem—the speaker's account of being raped—is both a form of reporting *and* an instance of the survivor taking narrative control. Although Lockwood's speaker did not consent to sex, she writes her own narrative of that traumatic experience and actively consents to its publication. (For the scope of this analysis, I am not concerned with whether

or not this is Lockwood's trauma narrative. The poem is her speaker's narrative, and we can read the poem as a first-person account of trauma).

23 Susan Brison claims that narrative does philosophical work in the aftermath of trauma, which is often both unspeakable and un-hearable (16). Saying something about memory does something to it, narrative replaces violence, and narrative actively integrates trauma into the survivor's sense of self (xi). In Lockwood's narrative poem, the speaker takes control of her own story, thus regaining a sense of power—with violence always hovering at the edge of this narrative. Lockwood reveals a power for words to combat violence—though we could equally note the ominous presence of violence remaining un-expunged in the narrative, suggesting that control can be attained but vulnerability cannot be excised.

24 Trauma narratives have social as well as individual importance. Particularly in theorizing about sexual assault, first person accounts from a survivor's perspective are crucial (Brison xii). Lockwood's poem meets this methodological need. The poem, told from the narrative I perspective, does not claim to generalize the speaker's experience; instead, the specificity of the account makes it entirely particular to the speaker while also facilitating understanding and empathy from its reader.

A Poem on the Internet

25 While "Rape Joke" functions in part as a first person trauma narrative, it also exists—as part testimony or disclosure—in a liminal space of public reporting. Yet it is also a poem *and* a poem designated as a "joke." A trauma narrative needs to be received by "understanding listeners," and there is a risk that it may be re-traumatizing when others fail to listen (Brison 53). A published poem seeks readers, and it may not artistically succeed if others fail to read it. "Rape Joke" is both a trauma narrative and a poem in need of an audience—which it achieved on the Internet.

26 "Rape Joke" is also a form of recording, though an importantly different kind of recording than described by Oliver. The speaker says "the rape joke is that this is just how it happened," (Lockwood) as though she were concerned with the accuracy of her account. This recording is purposefully public since the poem was published in an online magazine. By being a published poem, it moves from private to public sphere—a public sphere amplified by being a page that can be "liked" on social media, emailed, or shared. In addition, the poem might exist indefinitely on the Internet, without possibility of being retracted. Thus, unlike rape as a spectator sport on social media, here the reporting is a testimony to a collective. Toward the end of the poem, "The rape joke cries out for the right to be told" (Lockwood). The story wants to be expressed and heard.

27 The Internet publication of "Rape Joke" is another aspect of the poem's 'in-between' space. Existing on a website and shared on social media, the poem can be everywhere at once. Yet there is no direct audience or particular person to whom the story is being told. With the anonymity of the Internet, two questions arise: At whom is this testimony directed and whose responsibility is it to listen?

Conclusion: Moral Community and Ethical Attention

28 Part of what is at stake in the liminal space of "Rape Joke" is responsibility. By publishing a "rape joke" on the Internet, Lockwood turns a first person narrative into a third person narrative, holding all of us who encounter the poem accountable. This is done in part by revealing the reader to be a member of a moral community who can interpret the poem, make sense of the references, and understand the trope of the rape joke. We are astute readers of "Rape Joke" precisely because we are constitutive of the very conditions that make the poem literarily (and in this case popularly) successful. Our membership in a moral community makes this particular "Rape Joke" legible—with the Internet and social media extending such a community far beyond the more immediate geographical or social communities in which we participate.

29 Brison suggests we often fail to receive trauma narratives because we fear identifying with them. Identification forces us to confront the ways we too are vulnerable. This is part of her larger claim about

relational ethics and a relational self: We are vulnerable and not necessarily in control and have autonomy over ourselves precisely because we are dependent on others to receive and sustain our narratives of ourselves.

30 It seems possible to imagine an objection to the poem's title, "Rape Joke," since the name itself ignites several concerns about what motivates the readers to read it in the first place. Why click on the link? What expectations does Lockwood's reader have? To be offended? To laugh along with a rape joke? Either way we might be uneasy about what drew the viral attention the poem received. Is the initial audience looking to rape to be, as Oliver suggests, a "spectator sport?" In a sense, Lockwood has asked for spectators. But unlike the cases Oliver writes about—in which women were not in control of the public spectacle others were making of them on the Internet—Lockwood has taken the reigns of a rape narrative by asserting ultimate poetic control.

31 Another objection may be our concern for sexual assault survivors who encounter the poem. Could the poem trigger its own cycle of trauma and re-victimization? Responsibility toward the reader is another in-between space. The viral sharing of "Rape Joke" on social media—and articles written about the poem in ways poetry is almost never discussed in mainstream American culture—underscore the liminal social position of poetry. When published, poetry always seeks an audience, yet does not necessarily garner one as large as Lockwood's poem. The reach of "Rape Joke" was partly due to its medium and partly to its title's provocation. Yet this broad reach is tempered by the risk that a "rape joke," poetic or not, could be another form of violence toward anyone who could be or has been raped, not as a direct harm, but as a socially mediated harm (Wertheimer, 95) via social media. As Allen Wertheimer notes, the socially mediated harms of rape may be greater than those of other violent crimes (Wertheimer 105).

32 As a response to these objections, I am inclined to follow Susan Brison in her claim that trauma narratives ought to be received (and are often failed to be) precisely because they reveal through the first person narrative our third person vulnerability (57). We are all vulnerable, "none of us is *supposed* to be alive," and first person trauma narratives reveal safe space to be an illusion (123). The threshold between safe and unsafe is liminal, and just as we are vulnerable in the world, we are vulnerable in the World Wide Web. Oliver is right in showing what a dangerous place social media can be for victims of sexual assault. Recording of sexual assault on the Internet can further traumatize, and in some instances also lead to apprehending and prosecuting perpetrators of assault (Oliver). Social media can be at the same time violence and vindication, traumatizing and testifying.

33 Lockwood's "Rape Joke" rewrites the ways in which lack of consent is valorized and sexual assault is recorded on the Internet. It also introduces new challenges. How, in the liminal space of social media, do we take responsibility as a different kind of bystander? Surely not as one who photographs a rape and posts it to the Internet or who fails to act when seeing this documented in our social media newsfeed. Instead, how do we become bystanders who truly *stand by* those who have experienced trauma and listen to their stories?

34 "Rape Joke" is a form of epistemic resistance that shows the risks of resistance: The nowhere and everywhere of the Internet could offend, harm, or simply fail to be heard by others. But the poem also makes a demand: It draws its reader in as part of a moral community that "gets the joke" and holds the reader accountable within an ethical relationship to receive and respond.

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